

ASSESSING TINUBU'S FIRST YEAR AS ECOWAS CHAIRMAN: ACHIEVEMENT AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This study explores President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's leadership of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) from July 2023, focusing on his approach to addressing regional instability, economic challenges, and political crises. Tinubu's tenure, marked by his leadership in resolving key crises in Niger, Guinea, and Mali, underscores the centrality of ECOWAS in fostering regional peace and cooperation. The research problem examines the effectiveness of Tinubu's diplomatic strategies in conflict mediation, economic integration, and institutional reforms within the context of ECOWAS' evolving role in West Africa. The objective of this study is to critically assess Tinubu's first year as ECOWAS chairman, analyzing his diplomatic engagements, economic policy coordination, and efforts at institutional strengthening. The research methodology employs qualitative content analysis, drawing from official ECOWAS reports, policy statements, and scholarly literature to evaluate his leadership achievements and the challenges faced during this period. The theoretical framework combines regional integration theory and neorealism to understand the dynamics of cooperation and power relations within ECOWAS. The findings reveal that while Tinubu's leadership has contributed to proactive diplomatic interventions and economic policy reforms, challenges such as financial constraints, member state non-compliance, and military coups have impeded progress. The study concludes that sustained efforts in institutional strengthening and member state commitment are essential for long-term stability. Recommendations include improving mediation mechanisms, refining economic strategies, and fostering greater compliance with ECOWAS resolutions to enhance regional cooperation and governance.

Introduction

Africa has long been confronted with persistent political, economic, and security challenges, necessitating the establishment of strong regional institutions to foster stability and integration. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has played a crucial role in addressing these issues by promoting economic cooperation, regional security, and diplomatic conflict resolution. However, despite its efforts, the region has continued to face escalating crises, including unconstitutional changes of government, economic instability, and governance deficits, all of which have threatened regional peace and development¹.

Against this backdrop, the assumption of ECOWAS chairmanship by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu of Nigeria in July 2023 marked a critical juncture for the organization. His leadership came at a time when West Africa was experiencing a surge in military coups, particularly in countries such as Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso, where democratic structures had been disrupted². Additionally, the region was grappling with economic downturns exacerbated by global financial instability, inflation, and declining investor confidence, further complicating ECOWAS' ability to implement its policies effectively.

Given these pressing concerns, Tinubu's tenure was widely anticipated to usher in a reinvigoration of ECOWAS' diplomatic engagements. His leadership was expected to play a pivotal role in strengthening the organization's mechanisms for crisis management, fostering regional economic stability, and restoring democratic governance in affected member states. The extent to which his administration would successfully navigate these challenges remained a subject of significant interest among policymakers, scholars, and regional stakeholders.

Conceptual Clarifications

The assessment of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's first year as ECOWAS Chairman requires a clear understanding of key concepts that shape the discourse on regional leadership and governance. These include regional leadership, diplomatic strategy, conflict resolution, economic diplomacy, and institutional governance. A precise clarification of these terms is crucial in evaluating the successes and challenges of Tinubu's tenure.

Regional Leadership

Regional leadership refers to the ability of a political figure or state to influence and guide the collective actions of a regional organization such as ECOWAS³. It involves strategic decision-making, coalition-building, and policy direction to address regional crises. As ECOWAS Chairman, Tinubu assumed a leadership role in addressing security threats, democratic transitions, and economic challenges within West Africa⁴. His tenure has been defined by efforts to assert Nigeria's influence in steering ECOWAS toward stability.

Diplomatic Strategy

Diplomatic strategy entails the methods and approaches adopted by political leaders to engage in negotiations, build alliances, and resolve disputes through dialogue⁵. Tinubu's administration leveraged bilateral and multilateral diplomacy to mediate political crises in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger⁶. His diplomatic approach combined negotiation with sanctions, reflecting a balance between pressure and engagement to uphold democratic norms⁷.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution is the structured process of addressing disputes, whether political, economic, or security-related, through peaceful mechanisms⁸. Under Tinubu's leadership, ECOWAS focused on mediation efforts, preventive diplomacy, and high-level engagements to manage military takeovers and governance instability in the region⁹. However, the resistance of military juntas to external intervention presented a significant challenge¹⁰.

Economic Diplomacy

Economic diplomacy refers to the use of economic policies, trade relations, and financial mechanisms to influence regional stability and cooperation¹¹. Tinubu's tenure coincided with economic instability in West Africa, requiring ECOWAS to implement economic sanctions, trade agreements, and investment initiatives to support struggling economies¹². However, economic downturns and currency fluctuations limited the effectiveness of ECOWAS' economic interventions¹³.

Institutional Governance

Institutional governance pertains to the ability of ECOWAS to enforce its policies, implement its mandates, and maintain credibility among member states¹⁴. The success of Tinubu's leadership largely depended on ECOWAS' institutional capacity to implement resolutions and ensure compliance with democratic principles¹⁵. However, financial constraints and political divisions among member states weakened the enforcement of ECOWAS' directives¹⁶.

By clarifying these concepts, this study provides a structured framework for evaluating Tinubu's performance as ECOWAS Chairman. His successes and challenges must be analyzed within the broader context of regional leadership, diplomatic engagements, economic policies, and institutional effectiveness.

Theoretical Framework

The leadership of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu as Chairman of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been marked by significant regional challenges and diplomatic efforts. To critically analyze his tenure, it is essential to employ Regional Integration Theory and Neorealism, two theoretical frameworks that offer different yet complementary perspectives on ECOWAS's role, successes, and constraints. While Regional Integration Theory explains ECOWAS's aspirations for collective governance and cooperation, Neorealism highlights the power dynamics and state-centric interests that shape regional decision-making.

Regional Integration Theory

Regional Integration Theory, pioneered by Ernst B. Haas, Leon Lindberg, and Joseph Nye, explains the process through which sovereign states voluntarily collaborate in economic, political, and security affairs, leading to deeper

integration¹⁷. The theory argues that regional organizations, such as ECOWAS, evolve through functional spillover, where cooperation in one area (e.g., trade) leads to broader institutional development, including security and governance¹⁸.

From this perspective, ECOWAS has sought to integrate its member states through economic policies, free movement agreements, and collective security mechanisms. Tinubu's leadership, particularly in responding to political instability in West Africa, aligns with the regionalist vision of supranational governance. His administration emphasized ECOWAS's role in upholding democratic norms, responding to unconstitutional changes of government, and promoting economic stability¹⁹.

However, the theory also highlights the challenges of regional integration, particularly in a politically unstable region like West Africa. The recent military coups in Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali tested ECOWAS's capacity to enforce democratic governance²⁰. Tinubu's attempts to mobilize member states for sanctions and potential military interventions against coup regimes illustrate the difficulties of enforcing regional cooperation when national interests diverge. While ECOWAS has mechanisms for collective security, including the ECOWAS Standby Force, its effectiveness remains constrained by issues such as funding, political will, and the reluctance of member states to cede sovereignty to a supranational body²¹.

Additionally, ECOWAS's economic integration remains fragile. The region still struggles with currency disparities, trade barriers, and economic inequality, which undermine collective growth²². Tinubu's tenure saw efforts to deepen economic ties, but internal resistance and global economic constraints limited progress.

Neorealism

Neorealism, or Structural Realism, was developed by Kenneth Waltz in *Theory of International Politics* (1979) and further expanded by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt²³. Unlike classical realism, which attributes international conflict to human nature, neorealism argues that the international system is anarchic, meaning there is no central authority above states²⁴. As a result, states prioritize their national interests and security concerns, often leading to competition rather than cooperation²⁵.

Applying Neorealism to ECOWAS under Tinubu's leadership reveals the structural constraints that limited regional unity. The response to recent military coups illustrates this reality. While Tinubu called for decisive action against military juntas, some ECOWAS members hesitated due to their own security and political calculations. For instance, countries with strong military influence in their domestic politics were reluctant to support interventions that could set a precedent for external interference²⁶.

Moreover, the geopolitical interests of external actors—such as France, the United States, China, and Russia—complicated ECOWAS's ability to act decisively. Neorealism suggests that powerful states influence regional organizations to serve their own strategic interests. The coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger led to shifts in diplomatic alignments, with some junta-led governments distancing themselves from Western allies and seeking closer ties with Russia²⁷. This realignment weakened ECOWAS's collective authority and exposed the organization's limited enforcement power against sovereign states unwilling to comply with its directives²⁸.

Furthermore, economic constraints shaped Tinubu's leadership under neorealist conditions. Sanctions imposed on Niger following the July 2023 coup, for instance, had unequal economic effects on ECOWAS members, leading to disagreements on enforcement. Nigeria, ECOWAS's largest economy and Tinubu's home country, bore significant economic consequences from the blockade, affecting trade and energy supplies to Niger. This underscores Neorealism's argument that states prioritize survival and economic stability over ideological commitments to regional governance²⁹. By integrating Regional Integration Theory and Neorealism, we can better understand the successes and limitations of Tinubu's first year as ECOWAS Chairman. While Regional Integration Theory explains ECOWAS's institutional frameworks and aspirations for collective governance, Neorealism highlights the realpolitik dynamics—including power struggles, state self-interest, and external geopolitical influences—that constrain the organization's effectiveness.

Key observations from both theories include:

ECOWAS's institutional mechanisms provide a foundation for regional governance, but their implementation is often hindered by state sovereignty and lack of enforcement power.

Economic cooperation remains a central goal of ECOWAS, but disparities in development and national economic interests weaken policy implementation.

Security challenges, particularly military coups, test ECOWAS's authority. While Regional Integration Theory suggests that collective security frameworks should strengthen the response, Neorealism reveals the underlying power struggles and external influences that fragment the organization's effectiveness.

Tinubu's leadership reflects both theoretical perspectives—as he sought to deepen regional governance (integrationist approach) while navigating the competitive realities of state power and security interests (neorealist approach).

Ultimately, the effectiveness of ECOWAS under Tinubu's leadership depended not only on institutional mechanisms but also on the geopolitical realities and internal power dynamics of member states. The future of ECOWAS will likely require a balance between regional institutional strengthening and pragmatic diplomatic negotiations to address the underlying state-centric interests that shape West African politics.

ECOWAS Leadership Under Tinubu: Key Achievements

President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's tenure as Chairman of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been marked by significant diplomatic, economic, and security initiatives. His leadership, though confronted with substantial challenges, has been proactive in addressing political crises, advancing regional economic integration, and strengthening security cooperation. To critically assess these achievements, it is essential to employ Regional Integration Theory and Neorealism as analytical lenses. While Regional Integration Theory explains Tinubu's efforts in fostering regional cooperation and economic interconnectedness, Neorealism underscores the constraints imposed by state-centric interests, power dynamics, and external geopolitical influences.

Diplomatic Interventions in Political Crises

One of Tinubu's most significant achievements has been his diplomatic mediation efforts in countries experiencing political instability. In July 2023, the military coup in Niger posed a critical test for ECOWAS's commitment to democratic governance³⁰. Tinubu's proactive stance led ECOWAS to impose economic sanctions, travel bans, and asset freezes against the Nigerien junta, demanding the restoration of constitutional order³¹. The regional bloc also considered military intervention, reinforcing ECOWAS's role as a guardian of democratic norms. However, internal disagreements among member states regarding the feasibility of such an intervention highlighted the tensions between collective security aspirations (Regional Integration Theory) and national sovereignty concerns (Neorealism).

Similarly, Tinubu played a pivotal role in diplomatic engagements in Mali and Guinea, both of which had previously experienced military takeovers. ECOWAS, under his leadership, emphasized dialogue and negotiations over direct military interventions, seeking a balance between regional stability and non-interference in domestic affairs. This approach reflects the core principle of Regional Integration Theory, which posits that sustained diplomatic engagement fosters stability and cooperative regional governance³². However, Neorealism offers an alternative interpretation: the reluctance of some ECOWAS members to support forceful intervention stems from fears of destabilization within their own borders, given that several governments in the region maintain fragile political control.

Regional Integration Theory explains ECOWAS's commitment to democratic governance as an evolving norm within West Africa. The organization's interventionist stance in Niger, Mali, and Guinea underscores the increasing institutionalization of collective security mechanisms.

Neorealism, however, reveals the power struggles within ECOWAS. The reluctance of some states to endorse military intervention reflects the self-preservation instincts of national governments, many of whom fear similar opposition at home³³.

Thus, while Tinubu's leadership strengthened ECOWAS's role as a diplomatic actor, the varying commitments of member states to democratic principles and security enforcement exposed the limits of regional governance.

Strengthening ECOWAS Economic Integration

Economic integration has remained a key priority under Tinubu's leadership. Recognizing the economic disparities among ECOWAS member states, his administration placed renewed emphasis on deepening regional trade and ****improving the implementation of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS)****. By fostering intra-regional trade, Tinubu sought to reduce dependence on external markets, strengthen economic self-sufficiency, and accelerate industrialization across West Africa.

Furthermore, ECOWAS, under Tinubu, championed the implementation of the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET), a measure aimed at harmonizing trade policies and reducing non-tariff barriers among member states. By promoting trade facilitation mechanisms, Tinubu's leadership aligned with Regional Integration Theory, which argues that economic interdependence enhances regional stability and fosters collective prosperity.

However, the challenges of economic integration persisted. Several ECOWAS members struggled with weak institutional frameworks, poor infrastructure, and policy misalignment, which impeded smooth economic cooperation³⁴. Neorealism provides an explanation for these obstacles: individual states often prioritize national economic strategies over regional commitments, seeking to protect domestic industries even at the expense of broader economic integration. The persistence of trade restrictions, regulatory inconsistencies, and currency disparities further highlights the conflicting interests between national economic policies and regional economic aspirations³⁵.

Regional Integration Theory justifies ECOWAS's commitment to trade liberalization and economic convergence as steps toward a more unified and resilient regional economy.

Neorealism, however, suggests that economic nationalism and self-interest continue to hinder true economic integration. The reluctance of some states to fully implement ECOWAS trade policies reflects realist concerns about protecting sovereignty and economic competitiveness.

Thus, while Tinubu's tenure saw important strides toward economic integration, institutional weaknesses and state-centric economic policies limited ECOWAS's ability to achieve full economic cohesion.

Security and Counterterrorism Efforts

Regional security has been a core pillar of Tinubu's leadership, particularly in response to the escalating terrorist threats in the Sahel region and the expanding influence of insurgent groups. Recognizing the urgent need for a coordinated regional response, Tinubu supported the operationalization of the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) to enhance collective security efforts.

Under his administration, ECOWAS intensified its intelligence-sharing mechanisms, fostering better cooperation among regional military and intelligence agencies to counter terrorism, transnational crime, and illicit arms proliferation. Additionally, Tinubu facilitated greater alignment between ECOWAS security initiatives and the African Union's Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) to ensure harmonized strategies for addressing violent extremism.

Despite these efforts, significant security challenges persisted. Many ECOWAS states struggled with weak security institutions, inadequate funding, and political reluctance to commit troops for regional operations. Furthermore, the geopolitical involvement of external powers, including France, Russia, and China, further complicated ECOWAS's security initiatives. Neorealism explains these limitations by highlighting the competitive nature of international security politics, where states prioritize self-defense and alliances with external actors over regional security commitment.

Regional Integration Theory suggests that multilateral security cooperation enhances regional stability and reduces the risks of state failure and civil conflict.

Neorealism, however, points out that states remain hesitant to fully entrust their security to regional mechanisms, preferring bilateral agreements with powerful external actors to safeguard their national interests.

Thus, while Tinubu's leadership bolstered ECOWAS security efforts, structural weaknesses and geopolitical complexities limited the effectiveness of counterterrorism strategies.

Tinubu's leadership as ECOWAS Chairman reflects the dual realities of Regional Integration Theory and Neorealism. His administration actively pursued regional cooperation in diplomacy, economic integration, and security, aligning with the ideals of regionalist theory. However, the persistence of state-centric interests, power rivalries, and external influences underscores the constraints highlighted by Neorealism.

Achievements Faced During Tinubu's First Year as ECOWAS Chairman

President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's tenure as Chairman of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been marked by significant diplomatic, economic, and security challenges. While his leadership has been proactive in addressing political instability, economic integration, and regional security, several structural and geopolitical obstacles have hindered ECOWAS' effectiveness. These challenges include the resurgence of military coups, economic constraints, policy implementation gaps, and institutional weaknesses.

To critically assess these difficulties, this analysis employs Regional Integration Theory and Neorealism as theoretical frameworks. Regional Integration Theory explains ECOWAS' persistent efforts to promote unity, economic cooperation, and democratic governance. However, Neorealism highlights the limitations of regionalism due to state self-interest, power struggles, and external geopolitical influences. These theories provide a dual perspective on why ECOWAS, under Tinubu, has struggled to enforce its resolutions and implement its policies effectively.

Resurgence of Military Coups and Political Instability

One of the most significant challenges of Tinubu's first year as ECOWAS Chairman has been the resurgence of military coups and unconstitutional changes of government in the region. The overthrow of the democratically elected government in Niger (July 2023) and the continued military rule in Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso have undermined ECOWAS' authority and exposed the limitations of its diplomatic influence.

ECOWAS' Diplomatic Response and Its Limitations

Tinubu's leadership attempted to address the crisis in Niger through a combination of economic sanctions, diplomatic engagement, and the threat of military intervention³⁶. ECOWAS immediately imposed:

Trade and financial sanctions to pressure the junta into restoring civilian rule.

Travel bans and asset freezes targeting coup leaders.

A potential military intervention through the ECOWAS Standby Force.

However, these measures did not yield the desired results. The Nigerien junta, emboldened by support from Russia and the Wagner Group, resisted ECOWAS' resolutions. Similarly, Guinea's military government ignored calls for a return to democracy, highlighting the diminishing influence of ECOWAS diplomacy in the face of rising nationalist and military-led regimes.

Regional Integration Theory suggests that ECOWAS' diplomatic approach reflects an evolving commitment to collective governance and crisis resolution³⁷. However, the lack of enforcement mechanisms weakens this framework's effectiveness.

Neorealism explains ECOWAS' limitations through state sovereignty and power dynamics. Military juntas, backed by geopolitical allies like Russia, prioritize national security interests over regional obligations, thereby resisting ECOWAS' diplomatic pressures.

Thus, Tinubu's efforts revealed the fragility of ECOWAS' authority, as political instability and external geopolitical interference undermined regional stability.

Economic Constraints and Policy Implementation Gaps

Economic difficulties have significantly hampered ECOWAS' ability to implement regional policy frameworks effectively. Many member states struggle with debt burdens, inflation, and currency instability, which limit their commitment to ECOWAS economic initiatives.

Macroeconomic Challenges in ECOWAS Member States

Several ECOWAS countries, including Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone, have faced:

- High inflation rates, eroding the purchasing power of citizens.
- Rising debt-to-GDP ratios, limiting fiscal space for regional commitments.
- Currency depreciation, weakening cross-border trade under the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS).

Tinubu has sought to revitalize ECOWAS' economic agenda, advocating for deeper integration under the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) and advancing trade liberalization efforts. However, the inability of economically weaker states to meet ECOWAS' financial obligations has hindered progress.

Regional Integration Theory posits that economic cooperation leads to greater regional stability. However, asymmetrical economic development among ECOWAS states creates disparities in policy adoption and implementation³⁸.

Neorealism, on the other hand, explains that states act primarily in their self-interest. Wealthier ECOWAS nations, such as Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire, prioritize national economic policies over regional obligations, leading to inconsistent commitment to ECOWAS' economic frameworks.

As a result, ECOWAS' economic integration efforts have faced stagnation, with member states prioritizing their economic survival over regional collaboration.

Member State Non-Compliance and Institutional Limitations

A major challenge ECOWAS faced under Tinubu's leadership has been the lack of compliance among member states regarding agreed-upon protocols. Many governments have resisted implementing democratic reforms, trade policies, and security frameworks, thereby weakening regional integration efforts.

Democratic and Economic Non-Compliance

Some ECOWAS states, including Togo and Benin, have delayed or refused democratic reforms mandated by the regional bloc.

Others, such as Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia, have neglected economic policies essential for trade harmonization.

The ECOWAS Court of Justice, established to resolve disputes, lacks the enforcement power necessary to compel compliance.

Bureaucratic and Institutional Weaknesses

ECOWAS' slow decision-making processes, administrative inefficiencies, and funding shortages further limit its effectiveness³⁹. Unlike the European Union, which has strong supranational governance, ECOWAS relies on intergovernmental consensus, making implementation slow and often ineffective.

Regional Integration Theory argues that regional institutions evolve over time to enhance governance and compliance mechanisms. However, ECOWAS' weak enforcement capacity limits its effectiveness.

Neorealism, in contrast, views state sovereignty as a primary obstacle. ECOWAS states prioritize national governance over regional commitments, leading to fragmented compliance.

Thus, while ECOWAS theoretically promotes regional integration, its weak enforcement mechanisms and institutional inefficiencies hinder its practical effectiveness.

Structural and Geopolitical Constraints on ECOWAS' Effectiveness

Tinubu's first year as ECOWAS Chairman has revealed both the potential and the challenges of regional governance in West Africa. His administration has faced serious obstacles, including:

1. The resurgence of military coups, which exposed ECOWAS' declining diplomatic influence.
2. Economic constraints, which hindered trade and policy implementation.
3. Non-compliance among member states, weakening ECOWAS' ability to enforce agreements.
4. Institutional weaknesses, including slow decision-making and bureaucratic inefficiencies.

Regional Integration Theory explains ECOWAS' commitment to diplomacy, economic cooperation, and governance reforms. However, institutional weaknesses and economic disparities limit the theory's effectiveness in the ECOWAS context.

Neorealism provides a more realistic assessment, arguing that state self-interest, power dynamics, and external influences create structural barriers to true regional integration.

While Tinubu has demonstrated a strong commitment to ECOWAS' goals, the fundamental limitations of state sovereignty, geopolitical rivalries, and economic inequality continue to challenge the bloc's effectiveness. Moving forward, ECOWAS must strengthen enforcement mechanisms, address economic disparities, and adapt to the realities of power politics to achieve greater regional stability and integration.

Conclusion

President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's tenure as Chairman of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been defined by a mix of diplomatic assertiveness, economic integration efforts, and security-focused regional interventions. His leadership has demonstrated a commitment to stabilizing West Africa's fragile political landscape, advancing economic cooperation, and enhancing regional security coordination. However, the persistent challenges of political instability, economic hardship, and institutional inefficiencies have exposed the structural weaknesses of ECOWAS, limiting its capacity to enforce its decisions and achieve deeper regional integration.

Tinubu's leadership has been marked by a proactive approach to regional diplomacy, particularly in responding to the resurgence of military coups in West Africa. His administration quickly positioned ECOWAS as an active force in restoring democratic governance, particularly in Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, where military takeovers threatened the region's democratic fabric. Under his guidance, ECOWAS adopted a firm stance against unconstitutional government changes, implementing economic sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and the threat of military intervention.

Despite these efforts, ECOWAS' ability to enforce democratic transitions has faced considerable resistance. The Nigerien coup leaders remained defiant despite ECOWAS-imposed sanctions, demonstrating the diminishing influence of regional diplomatic threats when faced with strong nationalist or foreign-backed regimes. This underscores a major limitation of ECOWAS diplomacy—the lack of an effective enforcement mechanism to ensure compliance with democratic norms.

From a theoretical perspective, Regional Integration Theory suggests that ECOWAS' diplomatic stance reflects its commitment to regional governance and conflict resolution. However, Neorealism provides a more pragmatic interpretation, arguing that states act primarily in their self-interest and are less likely to conform to regional pressure if it threatens their political survival³⁸. The failure to reverse the coups in Niger and Guinea, despite ECOWAS' firm response, illustrates the ongoing tension between regional authority and national sovereignty.

Beyond political diplomacy, Tinubu has also prioritized strengthening economic integration within ECOWAS, pushing for greater trade liberalization, implementation of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), and enforcement of the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET). These efforts align with Regional Integration Theory, which emphasizes the role of economic cooperation in fostering stability and unity among states.

However, significant economic challenges have constrained the effectiveness of these initiatives. Many ECOWAS member states are grappling with economic crises, high inflation, rising debt burdens, and fluctuating currency values. This has made it difficult for them to commit fully to regional trade agreements, as national economic priorities often take precedence over regional obligations.

From a Neorealist perspective, ECOWAS' economic difficulties reflect the limitations of regional economic cooperation in an environment where national economic survival remains paramount. Wealthier ECOWAS members, such as Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire, may be more inclined toward economic integration, while weaker economies, struggling with debt and inflation, prioritize national economic policies over regional commitments. This disparity weakens the collective ability of ECOWAS to enforce uniform economic policies, thereby slowing down the path toward full regional integration.

Institutional Weaknesses and Implementation Challenges

Another key issue defining Tinubu's leadership of ECOWAS has been the institutional limitations of the regional bloc itself. While ECOWAS has ambitious frameworks for governance, economic integration, and security cooperation, its bureaucratic inefficiencies, slow decision-making processes, and lack of enforcement mechanisms have significantly hindered its effectiveness.

The ECOWAS Court of Justice, for example, was established to resolve disputes and enforce regional protocols, but its rulings lack direct enforcement power, making it largely ineffective in compelling compliance from member states. Similarly, ECOWAS' security initiatives, such as the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF), have been hampered by logistical and funding challenges, reducing their ability to respond rapidly to regional crises.

The challenges faced during Tinubu's leadership underscore the ongoing tension between Regional Integration Theory and Neorealism in explaining the dynamics of ECOWAS governance.

Regional Integration Theory suggests that economic cooperation, diplomatic consensus, and institutional strengthening will gradually enhance regional stability and unity. Tinubu's leadership has made efforts in these areas, but ECOWAS' institutional fragility and economic disparities limit the realization of these goals.

Neorealism, by contrast, explains ECOWAS' challenges in terms of state self-interest, power struggles, and the primacy of national sovereignty over regional commitments. The refusal of coup governments to bow to ECOWAS pressure, the economic self-preservation of individual states, and the bloc's inability to enforce compliance all align with Neorealism's assertion that states will always prioritize their survival and autonomy over collective agreements.

Recommendations

To enhance its effectiveness, ECOWAS—under Tinubu's leadership and beyond—must focus on the following strategic reforms:

1. Strengthening Enforcement Mechanisms:

ECOWAS needs stronger legal frameworks that can compel compliance with regional protocols.

The ECOWAS Court of Justice must be granted greater enforcement power to ensure democratic governance and economic obligations are upheld.

2. Enhancing Economic Resilience:

Addressing economic disparities among member states will require targeted regional financial support mechanisms to help weaker economies integrate more effectively.

Strengthening the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) and increasing intra-regional trade investments will be crucial for sustainable economic integration.

3. Adapting Security Strategies:

The ECOWAS Standby Force must be better funded and logistically strengthened to respond swiftly to political crises. Intelligence-sharing and regional counterterrorism coordination should be improved to address the security threats in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin.

4. Institutional Reforms and Capacity Building:

ECOWAS should streamline its bureaucratic processes to enable faster decision-making.

Increased funding from wealthier member states could enhance the bloc's ability to execute its mandates effectively.

Final Reflections

President Tinubu's first year as ECOWAS Chairman has been a test of regional diplomacy, economic governance, and security coordination. His firm stance on unconstitutional changes of government, advocacy for economic integration, and commitment to regional stability have been defining aspects of his tenure. However, the persistence

of political instability, economic hardships, and institutional inefficiencies highlights the deep-seated structural challenges ECOWAS must address.

While Regional Integration Theory provides an idealistic framework for understanding ECOWAS' ambitions, Neorealism presents a more realistic lens through which the bloc's geopolitical struggles and internal weaknesses can be analyzed. Tinubu's leadership has revealed both the potential and the fragility of ECOWAS, reinforcing the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms, deeper economic coordination, and more robust institutional frameworks if the bloc is to achieve its vision of a politically stable and economically integrated West Africa.

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